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AUTHOR Coney, Ruth; Kanel, Sylvia
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ABSTRACT

Interactive drama, a simplified form of drama, is a vehicle through which children can become involved with literature. When preservice teachers are presented with interactive drama in a college setting, it serves as an introduction to the simple, effective learning experiences available through informal drama activities. In an interactive drama, children participate in the retelling of a story by playing the parts and reading the dialogue of their characters, producing the sound effects, and spontaneously interpreting their roles while guided by the sequence, setting, and characterization of the story. A summary of studies on the effects of creative dramatics and dramatic play reveals their critical impact on early cognitive and social development. Of all the arts, drama involves the participant most fully--intellectually, emotionally, physically, verbally, and socially. Various studies show that children's comprehension increases and they are highly motivated to read if they are involved in analyzing and actively responding to the characters, plot, and setting. Dramatic interaction produces the valuable effects of drama without taking class time for multiple rehearsals and memorizing lines. The simplest type of interactive drama, an adaptation of role playing, can be used even with young children. (Contains 17 references.) (CR)

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Opening the World of Literature to Children through Interactive Drama Experiences

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By

Ruth Coney, M.Ed.

Walton County Schools

and

Sylvia Kanel, Ed.D.

North Georgia College and State University

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Introduction

When most teachers think of drama, they envision students memorizing lines, painting sets, and acquiring costumes and props. Many dread the chaos in the classroom and the pressure of an elaborate production. But with a simplified form of drama, called "interactive drama", the experience can be both spontaneous and comfortable. Interactive drama is children's creative participation in the retelling of a story guided by the teacher. The difference can be illustrated by comparing a formal dinner party engineered to impress a demanding boss to an enjoyable meal casually shared with a long-time friend. With interactive drama, no one is expecting a professional performance. Teacher and students alike can relax and enjoy their own creations.

When we present interactive drama to preservice teachers in a college setting, it serves as an introduction to the simple, effective learning experiences available through informal drama activities. When we present interactive drama to inservice teachers, we do it to remind them to make space for drama in their busy, demanding daily schedules. For people in both groups who want to open the world of literature to children, interactive drama is a tool to get children more involved in and understand more of what they read, whether the text leads them into the world of another's experience or deeper into their own.

Interactive drama is simply a vehicle by which children can become involved with literature. Although it involves *performance* in some sense, the goal is not performance, but *involvement*. Consequently many of the features normally associated with performance – costumes, sets, props, fidelity to the text – can be present or absent depending upon whether they conform to the teacher's and students' abilities, interests, and resources.

This form of drama is so easy that anyone can do it. It takes very little time because children do not memorize lines. An educator can schedule this easily into an existing language-arts program using basal texts or the school library. Teachers can lead children to respond dramatically to whatever reading materials they are already using. Later in this article we present an example of how spontaneous drama might be incorporated at the preschool-through-second-grade levels.

Interactive Drama

In interactive drama, children participate in the retelling of a story by playing the parts and reading the dialogue of their characters, producing the sound effects, and spontaneously interpreting their roles while guided by the sequence, setting and characterization of the story. This approach provides all the benefits of drama without becoming an expensive ordeal. There are many reasons to incorporate drama into the reading program. A summary of studies on the effects of creative dramatics and dramatic play reveals their critical impact on early cognitive and social development (Yawkey, 1983). The primary reason, however, is that students love drama and learn more comprehensively from that which involves them most completely. Nobody says this better than Nellie McCaslin:

> Of all the arts, drama involves the participant most fully: intellectually, emotionally, physically, verbally, and socially. As players, children assume the roles of others, where they learn and become sensitive to the problems and values of persons different from themselves. At the same time, they are learning to work cooperatively in groups, for drama is a communal art, each person necessary to the whole. As spectators, children become involved vicariously in the adventures of the characters on the stage. (1990, p.2).

Various studies show that children's comprehension increases and they are highly motivated to read if they are involved in analyzing and actively responding to the characters, plot, and setting (Bidwell, 1990). Encouraged by studies that have shown creative dramatics to be superior to discussion and drawing for developing story comprehension for kindergartners and first graders (Galda, 1982; Pellegrini and Galda, 1982), Coney (1993) discussed a story with half of the students in twelve second-grade classes and engaged the other half in interactive drama based on the story. Students who participated in interactive drama scored significantly higher on a comprehension test than those who were taught using the traditional methods of reading, discussion, rereading and filling in worksheets. Each group was taught for the same amount of time. The pupils who were involved with drama also rated the experience higher on an enjoyment questionnaire.

Dramatic interaction produces the valuable effects of drama without taking class time for multiple rehearsals and memorizing lines. Children learn by doing. Students plan the drama together promoting cooperation and discussion. Creativity and humor are encouraged. Pupils gain imagery, listening skills, and ability in oral expression (Bidwell, 1992). They learn because they use many senses and learning styles; they come to understand abstract ideas by enacting them concretely (Bolton, 1985; McCaslin, 1990).

Preschool through Second Grade

The simplest type of interactive drama can be used even with young children. It is an adaptation of role playing. Recently, three phases of playmaking have been identified as natural levels of development in young children: pantomiming action, improvising words, and building plot and

characters (Cline & Ingerson, 1996). Though predating Cline and Ingerson's study, Coney's use of interactive drama in preschool through first grade reveals the same sequential stages.

Coney's approach starts with story selection. Any good literature from the children's library can be adapted for interactive drama. Select stories with plenty of action, but only a few characters. Folk tales, fables and fairy tales make excellent selections (Huck, Hepler and Hickman, 1989). As Leanne Grace puts it:

> Children are always enchanted by folktales. Because folktales are found in all cultures around the world, they provide a natural introduction to cultural diversity as well as celebrating likenesses.... Themes are universal throughout countries, cultures, and times.... We are all alike and we are all different (1993, p. 30).

After the teacher reads the story to the class, the children discuss the characters while the teacher makes a list of their characteristics. This stimulates thinking and promotes a deeper understanding of each character. Children think through the sequence of the plot, reviewing the order of the different events. They discuss the setting and decide on how many scenes they need. These may be portrayed using the imagination of the children alone or by using simple props or children's art work.

Let children volunteer to play the parts of the main characters. Keep a record of this so that over the weeks everyone will have a chance to play a leading role. After watching the others, even shy children will be eager to take part. It is easy to play the role because the main characters just do the action following cues given in the story as it is read by a narrator. They usually either ad lib the dialogue or read a few lines written on a cue card hidden behind a prop. If a child finds it difficult to talk in front of a group, the narrator provides the dialogue. Each student decides how

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he or she will portray the character he or she is playing. Often the children draw or trace masks. Sometimes a student might decide to make a puppet, wear a prop, or simply choose a name tag worn around the neck.

The rest of the class will act as the supporting cast. They decide on phrases they will say and sounds or body movements they will do as a group while the main characters act out their parts. Here are some ideas of things they might want to try. (The students will do just a few of them for each play.) They may wish to clap, pat knees, snap fingers, tap or stomp feet, or imitate various animal sounds at just the right time in the storyline. Children often enjoy repeating funny words such as "Clackety-clack. Wham! Bang! Crash! and Boom!. Young students like to exaggerate facial expressions to show when a character is excited or angry. They may scratch their heads and look puzzled as the main character is trying to solve a problem.

As children discuss each character they decide on a few words to say at significant spots in the drama. They may choose, "He's mean." "Boo" or "What a beast! And growl or scowl for a villain. "She's so smart!" "He's brave!" "Watch out!" "Give me a break!" and "I'm the boss" are examples children have used for various characters. Write each phrase on a sign. The children designated as directors will hold up signs to cue the class when to repeat the phrase.

A First-Grade Example

Let's see how this works in a first grade classroom. The children have chosen to dramatize "The Carrot," a version of a Russian folk tale.

Soon a kindergarten class will come in to be the audience. Susan, an able reader, is helping another girl practice the narrator's part which is split between the two of them. Two boys gather the simple props including a drum for sound effects. Others tape a butcher-paper village scene to

the back wall. They have used a library-book picture as a model to illustrate this with markers and crayons in their free time.

In the story the first graders are presenting, a family has grown such a large carrot that the father is not strong enough to harvest it. He calls the mother, who pulls on his waist as he strains at the carrot. Soon the daughter, dog and cat have joined the line trying to uproot the carrot. Finally, to everyone's amazement, a field mouse quietly joins the effort and the family succeeds in harvesting the huge carrot.

As the kindergarten audience arrives, the child playing the carrot slips the orange butcher paper over his body and dons a green hat with a protruding paper stalk. The cat character has drawn a mask which she taped on a paint stick to hold in front of her. She wanted a speaking part without ad-libbing so she has taped her lines to the back of her mask. The dog is wearing a face mask he designed. He has made the eye holes big enough so he can see well enough to play his part. The father wears a beard made out of an old wig. Mother has a shawl and the daughter wears yarn braids sewn onto a scarf. The mouse wears a Mickey Mouse hat backwards. All of the props came from a costume box which the teacher accumulated from thrift stores. The collection includes hats, crowns, wigs, belts, shoes, assorted clothes, wooden swords and shields, and plastic implements for fantasy scenes. These costumes are never used for dress up but are kept for drama only.

The two narrators read the story while the actors play the parts. The other children in the class chime in with the phrases they have previously chosen. "Pull, pull, pull," they chant every time a character tugs on the gigantic carrot. They enthusiastically participate in their supporting roles with vigorous tugging motions. In this way all of the children participate to enhance the story line

with appropriate pantomime and vocalizations. When the mouse enters the scene, the class makes squeaky mouse sounds. Finally, as the mouse joins the line of pulling characters, they uproot the carrot. When the story concludes with a dramatic drum roll, all the main characters fall back and the carrot stands up. The class exclaims, "Our hero!" and the cast bows.

Young children like repetition and basic skills increase with repeated readings of a story (Bidwell 1992). The class can change phrases and sound effects with each retelling. They may want to add different characters or plan alternate endings. To expand the students' thinking skills and deepen their understanding of the characters, the teacher can have them imagine how these characters might act in a different situation or setting beyond the book plot. Then they can enjoy the drama again.

Conclusion

This approach can be seen as a mixture of creative dramatics -- acting without a script -- and reader's theater – reading aloud in dramatic style from scripts (Busching, 1981; Sloyer, 1982), but elements of drama that would appear somewhat formal in a more restricted context are here casually blended with the less-formal. While formal or scripted drama is generally considered developmentally inappropriate for early childhood (Isenberg and Jalongo, 1993; Mayesky, 1990), the interactive drama described here shows how freely teachers and students may move among all levels of enactment, even formal drama, if the atmosphere remains informal. Rather than limiting ourselves to a linear path, levels of drama activity can be taken as a set of possibilities from which different teacher-student teams might mix and match at their own levels of comfort to suit their own evolving purposes. Entering the levels at any point renders them more circular than linear (Cox, 1996). Cox encourages us to heed Brian Way's philosophy of focusing on the involvement

of the children, not the outcome of any particular method. Way (1967) urges teachers to start from where they are happiest and most confident – basing use of drama first and foremost on their compassionate interest in children. The approach described here is the lively result of just such a philosophy.

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